

JEPHTHAH

Introduction:

1. The end of chapter 10 saw the children of Israel in a dire situation.
2. God had given them over to the oppression of the Philistines and the Ammonites.
3. The Ammonites had encamped at Gilead, preparing for war against Israel.
4. Israel was encamped at Mizpeh, but lacked a leader to guide them into battle.

- I. Israel Chooses Jephthah (11:1-11)
 - A. Initially, Jephthah might not have appeared to be the right man to lead Israel.
 1. Though his father was Gilead, his mother was a prostitute.
 2. In spite of his transgression, Gilead had adopted Jephthah and raised him in his home as his son.
 3. It was not until his half-brothers had grown up that he was cast out of the household.
 4. The mention of the inheritance seems to indicate that Gilead had died.
 - B. Jephthah was forced to flee from his family, so he journeyed to the town of Tob.
 - C. Here, he became the leader of band of “idle, worthless” young men.
 - D. However, he proved his natural leadership abilities and became a “mighty man of valor.”
 1. This is very similar to the life of David when he fled from King Saul (cf. 1 Samuel 22).
 2. It is also a way of life that is not uncommon in the Arab world.
 - E. When Ammon began to make war with Israel, the elders of Gilead sought out Jephthah to lead them in battle.
 1. Obviously, they had learned of his reputation as a leader of men.
 2. There seems to be some indication that Jephthah was expelled not only from his father’s house, but also from the tribe of Manasseh.
 - F. In order to persuade him to fight for them, the elders offered him the position of leader of all of Gilead.
 1. It is important that Jephthah is the one to first mention the name of Jehovah in their negotiations.
 2. Israel still has not learned to trust God as their King.
 3. However, Jephthah declares that if there is victory it will be by the hand of the Lord.
 4. Only then do the elders make a solemn vow before Jehovah that Jephthah will be their leader.
 5. Here, we begin to learn that Jephthah is a man of great faith (cf. Hebrews 11:32).
 - G. So, he returned with the elders and the people made him their leader.
 - H. Again, in a solemn ceremony, Jephthah involves God in his leadership and service (cf. 1 Samuel 11:15).
- II. Jephthah Negotiates with Ammon (11:12-28)
 - A. The Ammonites were descendants of Lot (Genesis 19:38).
 1. Thus, they had a kinship to the children of Israel.
 2. This may be why Jephthah sought to use diplomacy before battle.
 - B. Jephthah asked the Ammonite king why he was attacking Israel.

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- C. He answered that he wanted to restore the land that Israel had taken from Ammon when they came out of Egypt and into Canaan.
 - D. Jephthah gave four reasons that the motivation of Ammon was faulty and argued that they had no cause to attack Israel.
 - 1. First, the Amorites – not Israelites – had taken the land from the Ammonites.
 - 2. Second, Israel had defeated the Amorites (without disturbing the land of Moab or Ammon) and conquered their lands (vs. 14-22).
 - 3. Third, Israel had been given the land by Divine right (vs. 23-24).
 - 4. Fourth, Israel had possessed this land for over 300 years (vs. 25-26).
 - 5. Thus, Jephthah rightly concluded that Ammon – not Israel – was at fault in this conflict.
 - 6. With truth on his side, Jephthah could trust his case to the One who judges perfectly – Jehovah, the God of Heaven.
 - 7. It is important to notice the character of Jephthah revealed in this story.
 - E. The response of the Ammonites was predictable – they hearkened not.
 - F. Thus, Jephthah led Israel into battle and to victory against Ammon (vs. 29, 32-33).
- III. Jephthah Fights with Ephraim (12:1-7)
- A. As happened with the great deliverance wrought through Gideon, Ephraim showed up after the battle and complained that they were not called to fight (cf. 8:1-3).
 - B. However, Jephthah's reaction to troublemaking men of Ephraim is quite different from Gideon's reaction.
 - 1. Gideon sought to appease their wrath and get on with the work of defeating the Midianites.
 - 2. Jephthah did not respond well to their threats.
 - 3. He declared that he had called them and they did not come to his aid when he fought with Ammon. *{Remember that Gilead had been oppressed by Ammon for 18 years! (Cf. 10:8)}*
 - 4. Nevertheless, the battle was won because the Lord was with him.
 - 5. In other words, as much as Ephraim did not want to admit it, God could win a battle and protect His people without them.
 - C. In return, the men of Ephraim began to taunt and ridicule the people of Gilead, calling them "fugitives," "refugees," or "renegades."
 - D. By so doing, they were actually mocking God who had given the land east of the Jordan River to them (cf. Numbers 32).
 - E. Thus, a fight began between Gilead and Ephraim.
 - F. By the time it ended, 42,000 men of Ephraim had been killed.
 - 1. Notice the important lesson of "Shibboleth."
 - 2. We, too, will be judged by our ability to "pronounce it right." *{Call Bible things by Bible names...}*
 - G. Jephthah judged Israel for 6 years, died, and was buried in Gilead.

Conclusion: *Jephthah was a man of faith who was enlisted in God's service, was enlightened in the Word of God, who was empowered from on high, who was enthusiastic in his calling, and who was engaged in the battle against God's enemies. Jephthah effected his promises, endured ridicule, and examined those who claimed to be friends but were enemies.*

THE VOW OF JEPHTHAH

JUDGES 11:29-40

Introduction:

1. The story of Jephthah indicates that he was a man of great faith and trust in the Lord.
2. He sought God's guidance, submitted to God's will and gave God the glory for his accomplishments.
3. Yet, he is usually remembered negatively because of the vow he made and the consequences of it.
4. However, there are still valuable lessons to be learned – even from the mistakes of Jephthah.

I. The Traditional Interpretation of the Vow

- A. Verses 29, 32-33 tell of Jephthah's raising of an army and leading them to victory over the Ammonites.
 1. This was done when the Spirit of Jehovah came upon him.
 2. This statement indicates that God empowered Jephthah to lead as judge and captain over Israel.
 3. It does not mean that Jephthah was kept from sinning or making a mistake (cf. Galatians 2:11-13).
 4. It also does not indicate that Jephthah's vow was made by inspiration.
- B. Verses 30-31 tell of the vow that Jephthah made to God.
 1. His desire of God was that he would be given victory over Ammon.
 2. If God would grant him this, Jephthah vowed that when he returned home he would sacrifice the first thing that came out of his house as a burnt offering to the Lord.
- C. Upon being given the victory over the Ammonites, Jephthah returned home.
- D. At his arrival, his only child – a daughter – came out of the house to meet him.
- E. Jephthah was overcome with grief because of his vow – he would have to offer his daughter as a human sacrifice to God.
- F. His daughter agreed to the vow, and after two months of mourning, she was offered as a burnt offering to the Jehovah.
- G. Following are arguments in support of this view...
 1. This is a literal reading of the text and the Bible means what it says.
 2. Even though it is unpleasant, it is a lesson about rash vows and the consequences of a lack of faith.
 3. Even though God abhorred human sacrifice, many bad things happened during the time of the judges.
 4. Jephthah lived in and was influenced by a pagan society.
 5. This was the view of the Jews and the church up until the Middle Ages.

II. An Alternative Interpretation of the Vow

- A. This view of Jephthah's vow hinges upon the word "and" in verse 31.
 1. This word can be translated as "and" or as "or."
 2. The New American Standard Bible and Young's Literal Translation render the word as "or."
 3. If this is correct, then Jephthah's vow takes on a different meaning.

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- B. This view has Jephthah vowing that whatever first comes out of his house upon his return will either be dedicated to the Lord (i.e., if a person) **or** will be sacrificed as a burnt offering (i.e., if an animal).
 - C. Thus, Jephthah's sadness was not over the death of his daughter, but because she would be dedicated to the service of the tabernacle, required to leave home, and forced to remain a virgin (cf. 1 Samuel 1:22).
 - 1. She was his only child, so this would end the lineage of Jephthah in Israel.
 - 2. His daughter would "bewail" her virginity because she would never be able to have children.
 - D. Thus, the emphasis in verse 39 is that after Jephthah kept his vow, his daughter "knew no man."
 - E. Another key to this view is the word "lament" in verse 40.
 - 1. The Hebrew literally means, "to rehearse, to recount, to tell again; to commemorate, celebrate, ascribe (praise), attribute honor" (cf. 5:11).
 - 2. Some interpret this to mean that every year the daughters of Israel would visit, talk to and sympathize with the daughter of Jephthah.
 - F. Following are arguments for this view...
 - 1. How could Jephthah be listed among the faithful in Hebrews 11 if he offered a human sacrifice?
 - 2. Human sacrifice was condemned in the Law of Moses (Leviticus 18:21; 20:1-5; Deuteronomy 12:31).
 - 3. What if an unclean animal had come out to meet him? What if it had been a neighbor or a neighbor's child?
 - 4. Would his neighbors have allowed him to sacrifice his daughter? (Cf. 1 Samuel 14:24-46)
 - 5. Where would he have made this sacrifice?
 - 6. If at Shiloh, why would the priests not stop him and inform him that he could redeem his daughter for thirty shekels of silver (Lev. 27:1-8)?
 - G. Whatever happened to Jephthah's daughter, we are taught an important lesson about making vows and keeping our word.
- III. The Importance of the Vow
- A. There are numerous passages in the Old Testament that govern the making of vows to the Lord (Leviticus 27; Numbers 30; etc.).
 - B. Vows were voluntary, but, if one was taken, God expected it to be kept (Ecclesiastes 5:1-6; Numbers 30:2; Deuteronomy 23:21-23; Psalm 66:13-14).
 - C. Christians must be careful when giving their word and always uphold their commitments (Matthew 5:33-37; James 5:12).
 - D. We must remember the vow we make when we become a Christian (Romans 10:9-10; Acts 8:37; 1 Timothy 6:12-13; Hebrews 4:14; 10:23).
 - E. We must be willing to keep our word – even if it requires sacrifice.

Conclusion:

- 1. In spite of the confusion that surrounds the vow of Jephthah, we still can learn important lessons from this incident in the life of one of Israel's judges.
- 2. May we learn not to speak rashly, but soberly.
- 3. May we learn to keep our word and live honest lives.
- 4. May we keep our vow to God – faithful unto death.